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The Colorado Trail

Why Hike the CT?

If you asked Coloradans what is our state's identity, most would say the mountains. Colorado is blessed to have the most and the highest mountains in the lower forty-eight states. We recreate here to camp, fish, hike, hunt, and ski. Besides ourselves, many tourists recreate in the mountains, and many people live and work in the mountains. We feature pictures of mountains in our postcards, paintings, photographs, and calendars. Along with our mountains is the state's biodiversity, with most of our wildlife and native plants still present in mountain ecosystems, although our biodiversity is under threat from climate change and development.

Colorado is truly blessed to have the Colorado Trail (CT). The CT is the highest long trail in the United States, averaging 10,300'. The entire trail is in the mountains. Much of the trail traces the Continental Divide, and, in fact, it shares the path with the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) for 314 mi. Depending on alternate routes, the CT spans at least 486 mi. between Waterton Canyon southwest of Denver, and Durango in southwest Colorado.

It traverses six wilderness areas and at least four roadless areas. While it traverses some of the finest scenery in the state, it also traverses some of the best summer range wildlife habitat in the state for elk, mule deer, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, black bears, mountain lions, and lynx. However, most of the wildlife are difficult to see from the trail in the daytime because of the daily foot traffic on the trail.

The Colorado Trail begins at Waterton Canyon, where the South Platte River exits the mountains. Denver is located about 25 air mi. northwest. Any discussion of CT history must acknowledge respect for the Native American tribes that once inhabited and “owned” the land. Simplifying, the Ute Mountain Tribe inhabited the mountains, and the Arapaho and Northern Cheyenne Tribes inhabited the plains. The Ute territory overlapped that the plains tribes, and the Utes often warred with the other tribes over buffalo hunting and horses.

During the Gold Rush of 1858, miners established the settlement of Denver and outlying mining camps, invading Indian lands. Indians were often seen in Denver, and the whites often skirmished with them as the Indians objected to the invasion. Various treaties were made and broken by the whites. In 1864, Governor John Evans issued a proclamation “to kill and destroy, as enemies of the country . . . all hostile Indians.” Colonel John Chivington then attacked the Arapaho and Cheyenne village at Sand Creek southeast of Denver. The Arapaho and Cheyenne were complying with orders by Evans to report to Fort Lyon. On a cold November 29, in a surprise attack at dawn, Chivington’s troops attacked the camp, consisting of mostly women and children, and massacred about 230 Indians and mutilated their bodies. Evans and Chivington later left their posts but never were tried for atrocities. The Mountain Ute people held out a little longer in their mountain fastness, the site of today’s Colorado Trail, as described in chapter 6. They lived sustainably with their environment, lessons we all can learn from.

Traveling southbound from Waterton, the trail begins in the foothills ecological zone and after ten or so miles enters the lower montane forests, where it stays for about 50 mi., then climbs into the upper montane to about Kenosha Pass. The montane is the lowest-elevation forested zone, composed of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir as the dominant tree species. After that, the CT traverses subalpine forest and long stretches of alpine tundra. In each zone, there are dominant forest species coexisting together.

Traveling southbound, the hiker gradually ascends from the foothills to the alpine, the same as moving northward in latitude by over a thousand miles. Conveniently, this book describes the dominant species of each zone and climate threats to the different forests as we ascend the landscape.

Each plant occupies an “ecological niche,” a geography that has just the right temperature and moisture regime for its survival and reproduction. Different tree species and communities occupy different niches. Ponderosa pine for example, thrives in a much warmer, drier, environment than Engelmann spruce. Some transitional geographies may host mixed conifer species, where one species or another dominates depending on the climate of the last twenty to fifty years. People hike the CT to experience the mountains, wildlife, and forests, many unaware of the ecological systems around them.

The idea of the trail started with Bill Lucas. In 1973 Lucas was the regional forester for the eight-state Rocky Mountain region of the US Forest Service, which manages a third of Colorado. He initiated meetings focused on establishing the trail and the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation (CTF). Gudrun “Gudy” Gaskill was asked to help organize the effort and became executive director. After many sputters, Gudy and the Colorado Mountain Club saw through the completion of the trail in 1987. She devoted the rest of her life to the CT, including hosting trail crews every year. She spent the whole summer cooking food and assembling supplies and visiting each crew of Colorado Trail volunteers (Colorado Trail Foundation 2008). She was in every way the mother of the Colorado Trail until she died in 2016. The trail is our lasting legacy from her. Being a Colorado Mountain Club member, I met Gudy a few times. I wish I had known her better. Today, the CT is managed by the Colorado Trail Foundation with funding from the US Forest Service and donations.

The mission of the CTF from its website is “to provide and maintain, through voluntary and public involvement, and in cooperation with the US Forest Service and federal Bureau of Land Management, a linear, non-motorized, sustainable, recreation trail between Denver and Durango. This trail will provide multi-day, inspirational, and educational values keyed to the diverse, high mountain, natural environment.” Its vision is “to provide a unique, high-altitude experience to support environmental education, an avenue for healing and self-renewal, an appreciation for the value of natural

systems, to encourage a cooperative effort to maintain these systems, and to promote a sense of public ownership” (n.d.).

I first hiked the Colorado Trail in segments over the years, beginning in the late 1990s and completing it in 2008. At first, I did not have any intention to complete the trail, but by 2006 I had it half done and so I decided I had to complete it. The CT was not well known back then and did not have heavy use. I hiked most days without seeing anyone. Like many hikers, I was working and could not afford to take off enough time for a through-hike, so I nibbled away at it for several years, a weekend here, a vacation week there, and so forth. I retired a few years later and hiked the three major national scenic long trails, completing the Triple Crown of hiking: the Appalachian Trail (AT), Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), and Continental Divide Trail (CDT) by 2018. I wrote about those adventures in my Kindle ebook *Triple Crown Hiking Adventures* (Ford 2021). In 2020, I decided that a redux of the Colorado Trail was closer to home and more realistic in the pandemic era.

On my first hike on the CT, I used *The Colorado Trail Databook*, a small pocketbook published by the Colorado Trail Foundation (2018). Although I teach map and compass courses, topographical maps are bulky and expensive, and on a long day I might need four to five maps and for a week, twenty maps or more. The *Databook* has sketch maps and trail descriptions and important features like water sources. That, along with the trail markings, was more than sufficient to navigate. For this trip, I still used the *Databook*, which is helpful in trip planning, but on the trail I used the FarOut phone app from faroutguides.com. It weighs nothing and has even more information and contour maps for the entire trail. I have used it on the other long trails I have hiked and rely on it. Some people question using a phone app because your batteries might get depleted or the phone lost or soaked. For the former, I carry a backup battery that can charge my phone at least once and have never had a problem in 10,000 mi. of hiking.

I found myself in my senior years wondering whether I can still hike the mountains and whether I can find peace and solitude away from the pandemic; the environmental crises; political divisiveness; and general tyranny, greed, and busyness of the world. I wanted to observe the health of the landscape in this era of climate change. And importantly, I needed to escape the war, traffic, smog, noise, politics, culture wars, electronics (mostly), bill-paying, password hell, home chores, and the whole constellation of life’s

cares for a while and recharge my mind and body. For me, getting into the backcountry is a constant need or refuge from the scary world.

My second hike on the CT spanned two seasons. The year 2020 had the hottest August on record for the state. In 2020, western Colorado had just completed its second-hottest summer on record. Red flag warnings and fire bans were the daily norm. A red flag warning means small fuels are less than 8 percent moisture, relative humidity less than 25 percent, and winds greater than 15 miles per hour—all dangerous conditions for wildfire—as we shall see in the next chapters.

During the winter and spring of 2021, the area was still in extreme drought. My hikes on the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trails took me through nearly 6,000 miles of western forests where I saw, firsthand, active wildfires, hundreds of miles of burned forests, and unburned but dead forests killed by insects. Because of these conditions and a horrific wildfire year in 2020, I needed to revisit the CT once more and report on its condition, not only as a trail but as a case study and viewing portal to the status of environmental health of mountain ecosystems in Colorado.